

## *Overstepping Boundaries*

Sometimes evil is simply the good that oversteps boundaries and has gone too far. It is this sort of evil that is hardest to perceive and is the most pernicious in its power to harm. In Western mythology the image of Lucifer, the "Being of light" who becomes Satan, "the fallen angel," applies here. In that story Lucifer, once the most favored, is so convinced of his goodness he thinks he is the Supreme Being himself. He oversteps his created limits.

Identifying boundaries goes with the territory in bioethics. Bioethics deals not so much with obvious evils, such as child abuse, famine, and violent crimes. No sound moral arguments are offered in defense of these evils. Rather bioethics deals with the subtler and more tempting alternatives that appear to be conflicting goods. In the euthanasia debate, overstepping boundaries is the danger, as it is in all growing technical wizardry over life and death decisions. Neglecting boundaries is a natural human propensity that demands constant vigil.

It is very seductive to gain dominance over natural processes to the point of reversal. "Death be not proud" becomes a warrant for the Faustian attempt to conquer human finitude and limitations in all areas of life. That effort is a major good, until it gains mastery over our own prudential judgments. Then it becomes a major evil.

No value is more closely guarded in free societies than the right of individ-

uals to make meaning of their own lives. The greater this freedom, the greater the strength that can come from tolerance and diversity in civil life. Yet there are limits on freedoms arising from other equally important values. One of these most certainly is the role of the state in protecting life and safeguarding the vulnerable from harm.

Both individual freedom to determine one's quality of life and social concerns to protect life clash in end-of-life decisionmaking. Traditionally, the winner in this clash has been the boundary established by the rule against killing, leading to laws prohibiting assisted suicide and euthanasia, seen as a form of murder.

In this issue our Special Section is devoted to euthanasia and social goods, turning to the impact on a society that must regulate killing even for good motives. Such regulation is complex. On the one hand, social policy may conserve the judgments of those who decide for themselves that their continued suffering makes no sense in their value system. On the other hand, society must regulate the practice as it grows either illegally (as in the Netherlands) or legally (as has assisted suicide in Oregon).

Public policy changes over time. The boundaries shift. Is it a good idea to permit euthanasia by recognizing technology's terrors for many near the end of their lives? Or is it better to regulate the practice while continuing to

keep it illegal, as do the Dutch? What kind of society results from such regulation? Can the complexity of the clinical act be properly a matter of public policy at all?

Further, throughout history society has erected guidelines under which the rule against killing could be suspended. Under these guidelines justification could be earned for capital punishment, just war, and killing in self-defense. We see the establishment of

comparable guidelines growing for euthanasia in the opening decades of the 21st century. Public policy will be a central agent in the gradual shift away from controls on life decisions toward greater individual determinations. To be sure, this is only one part, and a small one, of the increasing duty to ensure a good death that citizens owe one another in justice and compassion.